

Issue Brief – Vocational Rehabilitation

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION – OFFICE OF REHABILITATION

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SUMMARY

Vocational Rehabilitation programs offered by the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR) provide services to disabled individuals directed with the end goal of employment or increased independence from social interventions. Services include counseling and guidance, assistive technology, job training, job placement, and post employment follow-up. To receive Vocational Rehabilitation services, individuals must have a physical or mental impairment that constitutes a substantial impediment to employment. Eligible individuals work with counselors to develop an individualized rehabilitation program that leads to employment.

OBJECTIVE

This brief provides information on three Vocational Rehabilitation programs identified by the State Board of Education. These programs provide direct services to disabled individuals.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Increased caseload size represents one of the most significant issues facing Vocational Rehabilitation. The USOR has identified, and requests funding increases, for the following programs. The increased funding will be used to address caseload size or increase the number of individuals that can obtain Vocational Rehabilitation services.

Vocational Rehabilitation – Transitional Services \$612,000

Transitional Services aids students (16-22 years old) as they transition from “entitlement” services offered while they are in high school and “eligibility” based services that are available to adults. Transition students currently comprise approximately 14 percent of all referrals coming into the Vocational Rehabilitation program. During the 2006 General Session, the Legislature appropriated \$150,000 from the Uniform School Fund to provide for additional transition counselors to assist students.

The pending reauthorization of the federal Rehabilitation Act will likely require transition counselors to provide Vocational Rehabilitation Transitional Services to high school students starting at age 16. Currently, Vocational Rehabilitation provides services within one year of a student leaving school, usually around the age of 17 to 20 years old, to facilitate transition to employment or post secondary training.

In addition to an increase in the number of years that Vocational Rehabilitation counselors assist students, federal regulations require these counselors to perform additional job tasks not required of traditional Vocational Rehabilitation counselors. These additional tasks include attending Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and cross-training with Special Education staff.

Requested funds will provide for an additional 6 FTE: 4 Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and 2 secretaries. The Division has identified four school districts that comprise areas of the state that currently have most pressing need for VR Transitional Service counselors: Cache/Logan/Rich, Davis, Jordan, Ogden/Weber. The additional counselors will work with the students located within these school districts.

Recommendation: The Analyst recommends that the subcommittee prioritize the request for \$612,000 in Uniform School Fund revenue to provide for Transitional Services request detailed above. Further, the subcommittee may wish to examine how the \$150,000 in ongoing Uniform School Funds appropriated during the 2006 General Session was implemented and impacted transitional services.

Vocational Rehabilitation – Benefits Planning Services **\$158,400**

Benefits planning assists individuals receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) understand various work incentives and how these benefits are impacted by returning to the workforce. Many beneficiaries of these programs often rely on incomplete and inaccurate information when deciding to re-enter the workforce. Because of this incomplete and inaccurate data, many often decide that they cannot afford to return to work and lose the SSI/SSDI benefits. The benefits planning counselors assist these individuals by providing

accurate information on work incentives and the impact returning to work might have on their SSI or SSDI benefits.

The requested funding will provide 2 FTE employees to assist SSI and SSDI beneficiaries better understand the complex system of returning to work. These benefits specialists will assist approximately 300 individuals with information on vocational rehabilitation, re-training, assistive technology, and other services provided by USOR to help them return to the workforce.

Recommendation: The Analyst recommends that the subcommittee prioritize \$158,400 in Uniform School Fund Revenue to provide 2 additional benefits planners at the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation.

Vocational Rehabilitation – Assistive Technology **\$500,000 One-Time**

Assistive technology represents items, equipment, products, or systems that are used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. These items enable individuals with disabilities to improve their quality of life, increase independence, or function in the workplace. Individuals seeking assistive technology services must pass a financial needs test – funding goes specifically to individuals who cannot afford the services without assistance.

Each year, requests for assistive technology surpass the funding available. Once all revenue for a fiscal year has been encumbered, individuals seeking assistive technology services are placed on a waiting list to receive services the next fiscal year.

The Legislature has funded assistive technology on a regular basis over the past several years. Assistive technology has an ongoing pool of revenue to provide services. However, these ongoing funds rarely meet the requests for assistive technology services in a year. The ongoing revenue, and any one-time revenue appropriated by the Legislature, is often encumbered by the end of the second quarter in a fiscal year.

Over the past several years, the Legislature has appropriated additional one-time revenue to help with the assistive technology waiting list. One-time appropriations fit well within the assistive technology framework because the revenue is used to purchase products or make improvement.

Recommendation: The Analyst recommends that the subcommittee prioritize the request of \$500,000 in one-time Uniform School Funds to support assistive technology among the other requested items before the subcommittee.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

This section provides a guide of what actions might be taken if the Legislature wishes to adopt the recommendations presented in this brief.

1. Consider prioritizing an increase of \$612,000 and an increase of 6 FTE employees to the Division of Rehabilitation Services to provide for Transitional Services.
2. Evaluate and prioritize the request for \$158,400 and an increase of 2 FTE employees to the Division of Rehabilitation Services to provide for Benefits Planning Services.
3. Prioritize the requested increase of \$500,000 in one-time revenue to the Division of Rehabilitation Services to provide Assistive Technology products. Since this request supplements an ongoing appropriation, the subcommittee can determine the level of funding relative to available revenue.